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The New York Times

Afghan military handed a major setback by Taliban

By Rod Nordland

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An ambitious military operation that Afghan officials had expected to be a sign of their growing military capacity instead turned into an embarrassment, with Taliban fighters battering an Afghan battalion in a remote eastern area until NATO sent in French and American rescue teams.

The fighting has continued so intensely for the past week that the Red Cross has been unable to reach the battlefield to remove the dead and wounded.

The operation, east of Kabul, was not initially coordinated with NATO forces, but the Afghans called for help after 10 of their soldiers were killed and perhaps twice as many captured at the opening of their operation nine days ago.

"There are a lot of lessons to be learned here," said a senior American military official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the operation was continuing. "How they started that and why they started that." He said no public statements had been made on the battle because of the need for confidentiality during a rescue mission.

The Afghan National Army now has 134,000 men, and only Wednesday, the new American commander, Gen. David H. Petraeus, complimented the Afghans on reaching that target three months ahead of schedule.

Still, the Afghan National Army runs relatively few operations on its own, particularly large-scale operations.

The operation began when the Afghan Army sent a battalion of about 300 men from the First Brigade, 201st Army Corps, into a village called Bad Pakh, in Laghman Province, which is adjacent to the troubled border province of Kunar. Their operation, which began on the night of Aug. 3, was to flush out Taliban in a rugged area where they had long held sway. First, using the Afghan Army's own helicopters, a detachment was inserted behind Taliban lines, while the main part of the battalion attacked from the front.

But, according to a high-ranking official of the Afghan Ministry of Defense, the plan was betrayed; Taliban forces were waiting with an ambush against the main body of troops. Then the airborne detachment was cut off when bad weather grounded its helicopters, the official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the press.

In the confusion, the 201st Army Corps commanders lost contact with the battalion. The battalion's Third Company took particularly heavy casualties, the official said.

However, the senior American military official said the battalion had not been lost. "We know exactly where that battalion is," he said, "although there are several soldiers unaccounted for and several killed."